



“THE TIME IS NOW,
THE PLACE IS
FIRST-CENTURY
GALILEE”

Mark Adamo’s Exciting New Opera,
The Gospel of Mary Magdalene,
Reimagines One of the West’s
Foundational Stories

The Penitent Magdalene, 1664 (*polychrome wood*),
by Pedro de Mena (1628–88)

MUSEO NACIONAL DE ESCULTURA, VALLADOLID, SPAIN / THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

For composer Mark Adamo, grand opera signifies more than big production values, impressive sets, and musicians crowding the pit. The medium always had a reputation for spectacular entertainment, but Verdi, Wagner, and other pioneers used its grandeur as the Trojan horse through which to smuggle in their deeper inquiries into human nature. That vast potential still beckons to those writing opera for today's audiences. "As well as an experience of extraordinary amplitude, a grand opera is a metaphor: a 3,000-seat theater sends a message about both what we've been and what we still long for as a community," says Adamo. "So, when creating such an opera, one has to ask: how can you embody something crucial about the way we live now, as opposed to miming familiar ideas of long ago and far away?"

The question turned urgent when San Francisco Opera General Director David Gockley invited the composer-librettist to write a large-scale work following the two previous operas—both notable successes—he had commissioned from Adamo during his tenure as general director of Houston Grand Opera. And what could be grander in scale than one of the foundational stories of Western civilization: the emergence of Christianity from the relationships between Jesus and his inner circle?

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene, scheduled for its premiere this coming June by San Francisco Opera, posed the toughest artistic challenges Adamo has faced in his career. Five years have elapsed from initial concept to final orchestration (completed just this month). Yet even aside from that enormous investment, *Mary Magdalene* is as risk-taking a venture as it is audacious. Noting the precedent of ambitious projects like John Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, Adamo affirms that opera should "wrestle with large ideas yet, at the same time, present a complete drama in which music and language are deeply intertwined."

That's his goal for *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*, for which Adamo wrote both music and libretto. The production marks the Company debuts of Adamo as well as of director Kevin Newbury, conductor Michael Christie, and, in the title role, mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke; artists returning to San Francisco include baritone Nathan Gunn as Yeshua (Jesus), soprano Maria Kanyova (Miriam, Jesus's mother), and tenor William Burden (Peter).

Adamo's previous stage works show an impressive gift for connecting with today's audiences. His debut, *Little Women*, which recast the beloved Louisa May Alcott novel as a lyrically touching chamber opera, has been mounted more than 75 times in America and internationally since it premiered at Houston Grand Opera in 1998. The instant success of *Little Women* led Gockley to commission the highly acclaimed *Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess* (2005), based on Aristophanes' "make-love-not-war" satire and which was celebrated in New York and Washington before its most-recent engagement at Fort Worth Opera in May 2012.

But Adamo, now 50, has put his ability to reinvigorate classic stories with contemporary insights to the ultimate test. *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* presents a speculative vision in which alternative

narratives of the life and preaching of Jesus—versions that had literally been buried and long forgotten—are integrated into the familiar narrative of the New Testament. Adamo uses these sources to imagine a drama populated by "the living characters behind these ancient personae, the faces behind the masks. Ideally, such a drama could invite us to think deeply about the myths by which we live our lives. By 'myth,' I mean, not *lie*, but those narratives by which we organize our moral imaginations—and which need to be looked at afresh." The precedent, he continues, is Wagner's treatment of the *Nibelungenlied* in the *Ring* cycle, which wove its many strands of myth into a new narrative "reinterpreted for his time and place."

The Gospel of Mary Magdalene began in 2007, when Adamo chanced to read a lengthy article by critic Joan Acocella titled "The Saintly Sinner," (which originally appeared in *The New Yorker* issue of February 13, 2006). In it Acocella reflected on "the 2,000-year obsession with Mary Magdalene," the female disciple whom all four official gospels describe as the first witness to the resurrection of Jesus. But her presence in those gospels is otherwise minimal, sketchy, ambiguous. It was only centuries later that she became identified with a prostitute, an earthly antipode to Jesus' mother, the Virgin Mary—"sometimes a pinup, sometimes a sermon," as Acocella puts it—until both aspects were integrated into the image of the repentant sinner.

Over the centuries the Magdalene character (her family name is usually associated with Magdala, a coastal town in Galilee) would inspire thousands of artworks and nearly as many churches erected in her honor. But the startling discovery in Egypt in 1945 of other texts describing Jesus and his circle radically challenged the traditional view of her. Often referred to as the "Gnostic Gospels" because of their emphasis on esoteric wisdom (*gnosis* is the Greek word for knowledge), these were written between the second and fourth centuries C.E., a period teeming with competing early-Christian sects. They were, however, kept out of the official New Testament canon, though the Gospel of John shares some features with the Gnostic accounts.

Acocella's article surveyed some of the burgeoning scholarly investigations of these discoveries, which include, among others, the Gospels of *Thomas* and *Philip*, *Faith-Wisdom*, and *Dialogue of the Savior*. They not only helped illuminate *The Gospel of Mary*—an earlier Gnostic discovery from 1898—but suggested new ways of looking at the familiar story. In preparing his libretto, Adamo immersed himself in both the texts and their scholarship to develop a narrative about Jesus and his followers that grapples with the questions these new texts raise. For example, what role could Mary Magdalene—whom Jesus describes as having "a heart more directed to the Kingdom of Heaven than all your brothers"—have played in the evolution of Jesus's ideas? If they had married, how might this have affected the bitter rivalry—minutely detailed in the Gnostic texts—between Mary and his disciple Peter? For that matter, why, in the canonical Gospels, is Jesus consistently described as being "born of fornication?"

These various questions suggested to Adamo one overriding one, which he phrases as: "What is the role of *eros* in a godly life?" Traditional interpretations of the Jesus story duck the problem, attributing to Jesus a celibacy he never claimed and exhorting

Thomas May writes frequently for San Francisco Opera. He is the author of *Decoding Wagner and The John Adams Reader*



J. HENRY FAIR

Nathan Gunn sings the role of Yeshua and Sasha Cooke sings the title role in the 2013 world premiere of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene*.

believers to demonize sexuality and attribute it exclusively to women. (Explaining, perhaps, why the most-admired female figure in Roman Catholicism is the Virgin Mary.) But these interpretations ignore these Gnostic descriptions of Mary Magdalene as both “companion” and apostle; lines like Peter’s, in *Thomas*, urging Jesus to “make Mary leave us, for females are not worthy of this life;” that perception of Jesus as illegitimate child, and the enigma of the mother who bore that child.

So Adamo wondered: could you wrestle with desire and holiness via a music-drama in which no convenient miracles rescue any of the characters from the results of their actions; a drama in which the nearly-erased women characters were restored, in full, to the story? And could you do it without resorting to the fantasizing of, say, Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Last Temptation of Christ*, or to the medieval, folkloric Magdalene imagery—unsupported by Scripture—of Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*? “Some have asked me whether I mean *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* as an ‘alternative history’ like *The Plot Against America*,” novelist Philip Roth’s counterfactual fantasia in

which Charles Lindbergh is elected president. But—as the 100-plus footnotes of his 80-page libretto attest—Adamo wanted a *factual* fantasia. “I don’t say—I can’t say—that the Jesus story played out as I wrote it. I *can* say that—based on the texts that we now all share—no one can *disprove* it played out this way.”

Both playwright and composer, Adamo weighs the sound of his language as closely as his music, and the diction of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* tries to strike a precise balance between the personal and the iconic. “If there was a lost ‘original’ of the New Testament of which all our inherited versions are magical variations, how might its characters have spoken? Candidly enough to be credible as people and yet obliquely enough that you’d be convinced by their later transformation into archetype. Also, with no archaisms. For good or ill, this is a modern story.” (Ariel and Chana Bloch’s “frank, elegant” translation of *The Song of Songs* proved an indispensable reference.)

Musically, too, the same questions were at the forefront: “No archaisms,” and no Middle-Easternisms, either. The framing story

WORKS BY MARK ADAMO

Operas

Little Women (1998)
Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess (2005)
The Gospel of Mary Magdalene (2013)

Music for Orchestra

Alcott Music (1999, revised 2007)
Four Angels, Concerto for Harp and Orchestra (2007)
The Late Victorians (1995, revised 2007)
Overture to Lysistrata (2006)

Choral Works

Pied Beauty (1996, revised 2009)
The Poet Speak of Praising (1996, revised 2009)
Cantate Domino (2000, revised 2009)
No. 10: Supreme Virtue (2000)
Garland (2006)
Matewan Music (revised 2007)
God’s Grandeur (2010)

of *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* follows five disillusioned “moderns” who can neither wholly accept nor wholly abandon their traditions: it’s they who conjure the ancient tale to life. So, in sound as well as word, “the time is now, the place is Galilee, the first century C.E.,” as the libretto asserts. Balancing the intimate with the epic became indispensable when composing for 17 soloists, a chorus of 48, a Strauss-sized orchestra, and electronic sound design.

As in his previous scores, Adamo’s music for *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* extends from unadorned lines to clusters of granitic density; the composer weaves a web of leitmotifs that make audible a sense of destiny that each character intuits but none fully understands. But the larger forces enable here a characterization by texture and tone color that wasn’t as readily available in the smaller orchestras of *Little Women* or *Lysistrata*.

“For example,” says Adamo, “there’s this boiling cauldron of triple bassoons and marimba under Mary’s madness up front, which then yields to an aria beginning deep in the bass register and evanescing into a cloudbank of piccolo and glockenspiel. Miriam’s scena begins just with pulsing pairs of woodwinds, but thickens little by little into a grinding polychord: and the chorus in Act Two trade these slightly skewed triads so that you’ll hear, if I’ve done it correctly, an ebb and flow of consonance and dissonance.” When describing what he wanted from the score, Adamo repeats the word *iridescent*: “I wanted the feeling you get from a flashlight that sends beams of light ricocheting around a vast cathedral or underground cave but that never fully illuminates it at any given time.”

But—even as that chorus, in Act Two, makes a small ceremony of five entire verses, *verbatim*, of the gnostic *The Gospel of Mary*—don’t expect an oratorio. “I’m interested in drama, which invites conflict, humor, ambiguity; whereas an oratorio assumes consensus. A Bach Passion commemorates the Easter myth: it doesn’t interrogate it.” Nor is the opera meant as “a graffito scrawled across the New Testament. I couldn’t write this piece if I didn’t love this tradition as much as I argue with it.” *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* is designed as a character study, an intellectual safari, an emotional journey, and, above all, an adventure: “From Athens until now, the theatre has always been a safe place to talk about dangerous things. What can be more necessary? What can be more fun?”

MARY MAGDALENE SUGGESTED READING

The Song of Songs by Ariel and Chana Bloch
Modern Library, 2006

Mary Magdalene: A Biography by Bruce Chilton
Image, 2006

The Gospel of Mary of Magdala by Karen King
Polebridge, 2003

Early Christian Traditions by Rebecca Lyman
Cowley, 1999

The Complete Gospels by Robert J. Miller
Polebridge, 1994

The Word According to Eve by Cullen Murphy
Cowley, 1999

Adam, Eve, and the Serpent by Elaine Pagels
Vintage, 1989

The Gnostic Gospels by Elaine Pagels
Vintage, 1989

The Illegitimacy of Jesus by Jane Schaberg
Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006



Above: Set design for *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* by David Korins.

Left: The creative team for *The Gospel of Mary Magdalene* includes (L to R) San Francisco Opera General Director David Gockley, Composer and Librettist Mark Adamo, Costume Designer Constance Hoffman, Director Kevin Newbury, and Set Designer David Korins.



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